Critical & Analytical Essays

Interpretation of Desireless Action in Śrīmadbhagavadgītā

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on Niṣkāma karma or desireless action in the light of Śrīmadbhagavadgītā. Gītā, despite being a holy book, is an ethical handbook as well. So Niṣkāma karma or desireless action truly brings out the essence of the *Gītā* and revolves around the notion of desire and human agency in action. The paper first introduces what desireless action is and how it becomes a central question in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā. The problem lies in the very core of the concept of desirelessness in action, which is surprisingly the slogan of Anāsakta karma or Niṣkāma karma. The paper gradually progresses towards bringing a solution to the apparent contradiction that follows if 'desireless action' is considered in the literal sense of the term. Why Niṣkāma karma becomes the point of question is due to the very word 'niskama', which seems to be in an apparent contradiction with the word 'karma' or action. It is either Niṣkāma karma is possible, or it is not. But following Gītā, Niṣkāma karma is possible and becomes an ethical dictum mostly throughout all the chapters. To support the idea that desireless action is possible, I will provide three accounts of non-literal senses of the term Niṣkāma karma and will try to provide which of these three accounts gives the most plausible explanation. All the interpretations mentioned require explanations separately, and at the conclusion, I will provide my stand towards which interpretation is the most plausible one.

Keywords: Niṣkāma karma, Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, action, desire, fruits, dharma.

The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* revolves under the context of Niṣkāma karma or desireless action. The term Niṣkāma karma is a combination of 'nih' and 'kāma,' where "nih" means "without" and "kāma" can be understood as "desire" in a specific sense. This desire can be any desire. And, the term "karma" means action. So, the term Niṣkāma karma means desireless action. While discussing the *Bhagavadgītā*, certain essential questions evolve again and again, which are-

1. What is to be done? Or, to say differently, what should be the duty of a person? This is the deontological perspective, meaning focusing on the action itself in the purest form and not the consequences that follow from it.
2. How to perform that duty? This talks about the regulative principle, where a guideline or a standard is given that sets the boundaries of an acceptable action or behaviour.
3. The last is, why is the action or duty performed? This is the meta-ethical question.

All these three questions can be philosophised and can be evaluated in different ways and through different perspectives. Here, this meta-ethical question needs to be distinguished from the normative question. In normative ethics, the concern is with what is morally right and wrong. However, the meta-ethical question is a higher-order question that verifies the moral standards or criteria of action and not the action itself. This explores the status, foundations, and scope of moral values of that action or behaviour. Meaning, that the questions raised are "Is this criterion correct?" or "Can there be any criteria at all?" etc. This meta-ethical question is found in all thirteen chapters of the *Gītā* in one form or another, but significantly, the question finds its true colour in the discussion of

karmayoga. What seems essential here is the grand scheme, which includes Dharma, Niṣkāma karma, svadharma, fruits of action, and renunciation of that fruit of action. The connection of Niṣkāma karma and Svadharmah is of quite an importance and has to be dealt with separately.

Niṣkāma karma is a very remarkable conception as it is a synthesis of two opposite morals in life. It is rigorous, as it is performing an action or any action without having any desire, which at once seems impossible and unacceptable. One cannot remain without engaging in activity at any time, and for that, a desire towards the activity is necessary to execute it. In various verses of Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, it has been duly mentioned that no man can stay without performing any action, and without performing any action, no man can be free.

> *na hi kaścit kṣaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhaty akarma-kṛt*
> *kāryate hy avaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛti-jair guṇaiḥ*
> (B.G. 3.5)

This verse states that there is no man who can remain without action, even for a moment. Man, being bound by their inherent nature, is always engaged in some action. Not only that, following different schools of thought, and even as the central point of the *Gītā*, liberation or mokṣa becomes the ultimate goal. But, also for that goal, action is required, without which liberation cannot be attained. Yet again, this notion stumbles upon another contradictory notion, which is regarding- 1) having no desire while performing the action, and 2) this leads to no desire towards the fruits that the action is going to yield. Desires like thought, hope, belief, etc., are intentional mental states. These states have content and have intentionality or 'directedness'. Why it is important here can be understood by following an instance. Say I have a desire to have an ice cream. So, there is an ice cream truck on the road. Therefore, to fulfil the desire, I will perform an action that will satisfy a certain desire: getting a cone of ice cream for myself. Here, the content of my desire is that 'I want a cone of ice cream'. So, my desire for

a cone of ice cream is propelling me to that action and my walk or my action towards the ice cream truck is not dispositional. It is intentional. Now, understanding this in the context of Gītā, desire or ichha or will has to be a causal factor towards any action. Not all actions are dispositional. There are certain desires that propel us towards actions. But we find the 47th verse of the 2nd chapter in the Gītā, which states-

> *karmaṇyevādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana*…(B.G. 2.47)

This means having no desire for the fruits of the action or not acting with the desire of enjoying the fruits of action. This suggests that both kṛtṛtvābhimāna (pride of doership) and desire are unacceptable, and this points to a contradiction. Then arises the question regarding the desire for the action, agency, and fruits that action yields, as well as the enjoyment of that fruit of action. Therefore, this means acting without having a desire towards the action. But action without desire seems apparently unacceptable. Hence, the basic arguments are-

1) Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act without desire.
2) Following orthodox philosophy, desire is the necessary condition for action.
3) Hence, Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna against acting.
4) Kṛṣṇa's advice leads to a contradiction.
5) Kṛṣṇa's advice does not lead to absurdity.

Here, we get three possible conclusions and will deal with each separately.

Now, the question that follows is whether the moral injunctions provided in the *Gītā* are contradictory to each other. Is Kṛṣṇa really pointing at non-action? To answer the second question first, Kṛṣṇa can be seen, from the very beginning, pointing to action rather than non-action. This seems to add to the contradiction that has been stated.

> *niyataṁ kuru karma tvaṁ karma jyāyo hy akarmaṇaḥ*

śarīra-yātrā ʹpi ca te na prasiddhyed akarmaṇaḥ
(B.G. 3.8)

Lord Kṛṣṇa states that Arjuna should perform his obligatory duties, for action is superior to inaction. And through inaction, the maintenance of his own body will not be possible. Therefore, action is inevitable. This can be said to be the central theme of the *Gītā*, in which Arjuna refuses to take part in the war and Kṛṣṇa motivates him to do otherwise. Taking part in the war means performing an action. Not only that, such an action bears consequences that Arjuna fears can be detrimental to himself as well as society. Still, Kṛṣṇa proposed that Arjuna's moral dilemma was the result of the illusion of attaining 'adharma' by taking part in the war.

atha cet tvam imaṁ dharmyaṁ saṅgrāmaṁ na kariṣyasi
tataḥ sva-dharmaṁ kīrtiṁ ca hitvā pāpam avāpsyasi (B.G. 2.33)

The verse states that if the righteous battle is not fought by Arjuna, then, by forsaking his own duty and fame, he will incur sin. Thus, under any circumstances, one has to perform duty, which is an action.

But, as the Lord suggests, one has to perform their Svadharmah, which means the action assigned for them and themselves only, following different verses in the *Gītā*, but most prominently in the 35th verse of the 3rd chapter.

śreyān sva-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt
svabhāva-niyataṁ karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam
(B.G. 3.35)

The Svadharmah is determined by the varna and ashrama. But behind the four varnas and ashrama dharma lie the three gunas- sattvah, rajah, and tamah or the prakṛti. But it has to be noted that this prakṛti is dependent on karmaphala or the fruits of action from the previous birth. This refers to janmāntaravāda or the chain of rebirth,

which is the immortality of the soul. So, in short, Kṛṣṇa is not pointing to non-action, but action in a specific sense. But the first question raised regarding the contradiction found in the framework of the *Gītā* is left to be discussed. In Indian philosophy, the value system is very much associated with the theory of Puruṣārtha. There are primarily four puruṣārthas. Each puruṣārtha is to be attained or realised for a virtuous life. One of these is mokṣa. Therefore, even for such an objective as mokṣa, one has to perform an action. The soul is trapped through the chain of rebirth in samsara, and the soul can be liberated only through mokṣa. But even performing an action, like attaining mokṣa, presupposes desire as a causal factor. So, following this, even mokṣa or liberation would not be possible if there is no desire towards it. Therefore, the question can be modified as to whether desireless action is possible in the framework of the *Gītā*.

To answer such a question, the non-literal interpretations of the *Gītā* can be taken into account. The interpretations will be discussed as follows: 1. The No-action interpretation, [as found in the article by Simon Brodbeck 'Calling Kṛṣṇa's Bluff: Non-Attached Action In the "Bhagavadgītā"' (published in the Journal of Philosophy, February 2004, vol 32).] 2. The Some Desire Interpretation [as found in the writing of Christopher G. Framarin in his article 'Good and Bad Desires: Implications of the Dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna' (which was published in the 'International Journal of Hindu Studies,' August 2007, Vol 11).] And lastly, 3. The No-Action Interpretation [which is an understanding of an article by Arindam Chakrabarti, 'The End of Life: A Nyāya Kantian Approach to the Bhagavadgītā' (published in the Journal of Indian Philosophy, 1988)]. Hence, these three views are relevant in understanding the thesis of Niṣkāma karma in the Gītā.

1. **The No-Action Interpretation (as found in the writing of Simon Brodbeck) –**

If the conclusion is that Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to take no action, then this leads to a contradiction in the *Gītā's* structure. But such cannot be the case. This no-action can be said in the non-literal meaning of the term. *Gītā* disapproves of no action, and the main advice is to take action. But such action is not 'paradharma' or anyone else's. This leads to the behavioural take on *Gītā's* dictum "karmaṇyevādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana." Following Simon Brodbeck and George Teschner, here 'action' in a sense lies more under the paradigm of behavioural science and less under moral philosophy. According to this interpretation of the no-desire action of the *Gītā*, the explanation can be provided based on an action being 'intentional' or 'non-intentional'. When the action has a certain intention towards 'I', the actor is performing depending on an incentive. Then the sense which dawned on the person is that 'I am the doer'. So being the doer, the person awaits the fruits of action. But when a person is performing the action non-intentionally, the action is mechanical. The term 'mechanical' has to be understood as a disposition. Just like it is the disposition of sugar to dissolve in water, similarly, it is the disposition that is driving the person towards the action. So, in disposition, there is no desire involved, and it is more like a behaviour. This can be an account of 'non-attached' action or Anāsakta karma. There exists no intention of the performer, and so the action can be considered desireless and the actor as a non-performer. This can be an approach in which the notion of Niṣkāma karma, as provided by Lord Kṛṣṇa, fits in the grand scheme of actions outside the ethical system of the *Gītā*. Seen in the light of the *Gītā*, the actor does not and should not have any adhikāra or agency on the fruits of his actions. Like behaviour, the person will perform the action and will not think that 'I am the doer' of the action.

This interpretation has found its way in the Sāṅkhyean analysis of the interaction of trigunas or the distinctive three gunas in prakṛti or the material world. The prakṛti is composed of these three gunas, and so,

humans also have these three gunas in them. There are alterations in the composition of the gunas in each person, and that varies from person to person. Such gunas are Sattah, Rajah and Tamah. The composition of the gunas is inherent to the being. Being such, this composition determines how the person will act, which is similar to behaviour. So, it is something that is instinctive. In the *Gītā*, in various verses, there is mention of different types of doers, namely- sattvik kṛtā, rājasik kṛtā and tāmasik kṛtā. Following such a classification of the doers, these actors or doers or kṛtā perform actions not depending wholly on the fruits of action. So, they do not "act" in the sense we mean as an intentional doer of the action. An analogy can be used in this regard that a sunflower usually moves or faces towards the sunlight. This means the more sunlight, the more it will help in its growth. As we can see, here the movement of the flower is not due to 'desire of growth' but performing action as a behaviour, which is instinctive. Similarly, due to the interaction of the gunas, there are the four varnas of the varnāsrama who behave according to the composition of their prakriti, making them 'non-performers' of the actions. So, their actions are already determined and not intentional following this account of the no-action thesis. Therefore, human behaviour is explained causally and not teleologically, in terms of the agent's desires and intentions. And so human behaviour becomes instinctive and not intentional.

But the immediate question that follows this account is: Is the 'no-action' interpretation of the *Gītā* plausible? Apparently, this interpretation could have been considered convincing enough to support the whole scheme of action in the Gītā. Yet there are certain inadequacies in this thesis.

i) If such an interpretation is followed, then the verse that builds the foundation of karma yoga is -

> *karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana*
> *mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv*
> *akarmaṇi,*

which means "never should consequences result, purposes be your motive and also states that there should be no inclination towards 'akarma' or no action. The verse itself is going against the no-action interpretation, which regards desireless action as behavioural or instinctive. Now, just like the objections that are raised against behaviourism, similar objections are found against this interpretation as well. If everything is based on behaviour and there is no role of desire or mental processes involved, then that behaviour is nothing but a drill. So, there lies no room for any moral dilemma, which is quite common. A person who is still in the process of karmayoga or is practising, to that individual, there will occur situations that will lead to some sort of dilemma. What is expected of that person is to use their best judgment and, in this case, it is following their Svadharmah. But while following Svadharmah, the individual has to have some kind of awareness. But if that is all instinctive, then there lies no room for such an awareness.

ii) In the verse, it is mentioned …*mā phaleṣu kadācana-* where the term *mā* can be taken in two ways- first as having no agency in the fruits of the action and second as merely an imperative that one must not have any right over the fruits of action. In this interpretation, the second sense has been granted, which is contradictory to the mechanical interpretation in terms of the tripartite classification of the prakṛti and their influence on human personality and actions. Because if one is always guided under the influence of their prakṛti, then, there the use in the sense of an imperative, the mentioned verse takes an absurd form.

iii) Therefore, having no desire towards an action may be in the literal sense or non-literal sense of behaviour, which is contradictory and leads to difficulty in understanding the meaning of the verse itself.

2) Some Desire Interpretation (as found in the writings of Christopher G. Framarin)-

Gītā stands on the moral dilemma that Arjuna faced during the war of Kurukṣetra, which then leads to this dialogue between the Lord and Arjun. Arjuna gave reasons as to why he should not fight the war, as it would lead to destruction, chaos, and adharma. Again, on the other hand, he was also going against his Svadharmah of being a kṣatriya. These are subsequently given in verses 1.31, 1.36, 1.32, and from 1.40 to 1.44, respectively. In these verses, Arjuna mentions that no good signs but bad signs will arise if he fights and kills his own people. From killing his own people, no good can possibly arise, and he does not desire victory or kingdom over this. There will prevail only corruption and anarchy after the war, leading to social breakdown, and the security of women and children will be at stake. So, following such overall consequences, his decision not to fight is more justified than the overall consequences of fighting the war. But, to take Kṛṣṇa's advice to act "without desire, having discarded all desires" seems to contradict the general thesis that all actions presuppose desire. Now, if Arjuna is devoid of all desires, then he cannot fight the battle because fighting the battle is an action that has to compulsorily presuppose a desire. So, following Framarin, the arguments can be modelled as follows-

i) Arjuna can either fight the war or not fight the war.
ii) If he fights, certain bad consequences will follow, such as his going to hell, the death of loved ones, chaos, and social breakdown
iii) If he does not fight the war, then all these consequences can be avoided
iv) The consequences of not fighting are better than the consequences of fighting the war
∴ Arjuna should not fight the war.

In this way, his arguments for not fighting the war seem relatively strong. But Kṛṣṇa objects to Arjuna's decision. His point would be to make Arjuna realise that the consequences of fighting the war are better than the

consequences of not fighting it. Quoting Framarin, "Kṛṣṇa cites some consequences that Arjuna has already said he does not desire is important here." Meaning he should desire those consequences. Therefore, Arjuna cannot fight the battle if he is completely desireless. So, following this, Kṛṣṇa could not prohibit all desires. Here *mā* (in verse 2.47 of *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*) stands for prohibition, but not prohibition of desire towards all fruits of action. So, the distinction here is made between permissible desires and impermissible desires. This can be said to be the 'some desire interpretation of desireless action'- here it is put in a way to show that desireless action is possible, but not considering 'desireless' in the literal sense of the term. Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to give away all the impermissible desires and have the permissible desires only. Hence, there are good desires and bad desires. But what are the criteria for distinguishing between good and bad desires? - The answer to this lies in the distinction between permissible desires and non-permissible desires. If one has to argue regarding the wide range of views found regarding which desires following the *Gītā* are permissible or non-permissible, it can be roughly said that the permitted class is the unselfish desires and the prohibited class is the selfish desires. This is one of the most common and contemporary interpretations of desireless action in the *Gītā*. From *Gītā's* verses, pieces of evidence can be gathered to support that desireless action is pointing at permitting certain good desires and refraining from having certain bad desires. Kṛṣṇa asked Arjuna to fight the war, and in return, he would receive certain good fruits. So, this raises questions like- a) can svadhārma be considered under Niṣkāma karma? b) and how can Arjuna, without being the cause of the action, be the agent of that action? Here, a distinction between consequences can be made. Consequences can be of two types: one is a causal consequence, and the other is an entailed consequence. To answer the first question raised, if Arjuna acts, that is, keeping in mind, desiring heaven and all the good, then he becomes the actor towards the action and becomes the

cause towards the action. So, the effects are the causal consequences. Thus, that is not Niṣkāma karma in any sense. But, if we opt for entailed consequences, where Arjuna is not acting for the desire of all the good but with the desire of performing his duty, which is his Svadharmah. This interpretation of Framarin also takes up the form of 'Mokṣa only Interpretation' where Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act only with the desire of liberation. One will attain liberation if he performs or even tries to perform his svadharma or duty. And by performing such, liberation will automatically entail. Then that can be said to the entail consequence and the causal consequence. But the question can be that even if one performs his duty, which results in bad consequences like death or killing, then how is that desire towards such an action permissible? This can be answered as these consequences are not a lack of morality but a part of performing the duty. Also, mokṣa will automatically entail as a consequence. The benefit of performing the duty (here, fighting the war) is already entailed, and there lies no scope for causal consequences here. If duty is considered as a causal condition, then that does not satisfy the path towards the achievement of mokṣa.

But, this distinction between good desires and bad desires in the case of Niṣkāma karma can face certain objections-

i) This distinction between good and bad desires may sound problematic because for such a distinction, there has to be a general rule. But how can desires have a general rule? There have to be certain exceptions attached to it. Desire is very much subjective, and being so, it cannot have a universal guiding rule. Even if there is one, its application will depend on situation to situation. Again, for exceptions, another solid rule is required, which will have exceptions as well. This will lead to infinite regress, and no such fundamental rule can be provided.

ii) In various verses of the Gītā, the concept of "complete abandonment" of *kāman sarvān*, meaning "all

desires", as found in the interpretation of Sankara. In verses like 2.55, 2.71, 6.18, etc. So, this interpretation will not suffice as an explanation of desireless action or Niṣkāma karma.

Here, it is necessary to quote John McDowell to understand that codification of moral conduct is not feasible:

> If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong…because…one's mind on the matter was no susceptible of capture in any universal formula. (148)

This process will be infinite according to McDowell.

This brings us to the last non-literal interpretation of the desireless action as mentioned in the *Gītā*. This can be named the No-Desire Interpretation.

3) The No Desire Interpretation (following Arindam Chakrabarti)-

To place this interpretation within the framework of this paper, it is required to discuss a few tenets that have been mentioned in the article 'The End of Life: A Nyāya-Kantian Approach To The Bhagavadgītā'. What is an end? Is it a thing in itself? Or, the point that marks the end of a process? Professor Chakrabarti here offers many interpretations of what an end means. Just like following the Wittgensteinian approach, death is not an event in itself, but the end of a journey, that is, life. So, from birth to death, life is just a process, and death marks the end of it. Similarly, following this account, Mokṣa, which is one of the Puruṣārthas, can be said to be an end in itself. Following Mill, this can be called "the art of life", which tells us about the ultimate ends, that is, the *ends-in-*

themselves. A similar interpretation can be found in the Nyāya system through the words of Gadadhara:

> An end-in-itself is defined by him as an object of a desire such that the desire is *not* subservient to any further desire. Only happiness, enjoyment or awareness of happiness (these two being distinguished for intricate epistemological reasons), and absence of suffering are said to be possible ends-in-themselves, all other ends being only sunordinate or secondary ends." (Chakrabarti 329)

Another such art of life can be found in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as well. This interpretation, as its premise, acknowledges that the "tension" between Niṣkāma karma and desire is real and cannot be well explained by the distinction between good and bad desires. Whenever Niṣkāma karma is tied to the concept of liberation, the concept "niskama" can be easily questioned. So, the way this interpretation understands Niṣkāma karma is that the desire for 'liberation' or mokṣa is not any ordinary desire. This desire is quite compatible with "desirelessness." Liberation in the Gītā has been considered a blissful state. So, following Chakrabarti, the desire for such will be a desire for happiness, without sorrow. Here it can be said that it is not desire as what we mean by 'desire' as such, but motive. The individual, inside and outside the framework of the *Gītā*, should act in a manner that shows disinterestedness, and the action should be prompted by the motive of mokṣa. So, mokṣa is the telos here. The individual is performing duty for the sake of duty, and if such is maintained as a rule, then that will provide him with absolute peace. So, the actor is not acting for the sake of action but ultimately receives it. Thus, Niṣkāma karma or desireless action has to be understood in the strict sense of the term, in an exhaustive manner. But the question arises, where it has been said that ultimate peace will dawn upon the actor as a reward who acts for the sake of

duty? Chakrabrati provides the solution that the Gītā has to be treated as an *act-deontologist* and *rule-teleologist*. This means that the actor has to perform the action as prescribed by the scriptures because it has been prescribed to do so, without having any other motive of attaining liberation. The wise actor will act without taking it under consideration whether the action will yield good or bad results.

This interpretation has a Kantian tone to it. Following the Kantian account, if the person performs duty for the sake of duty, then happiness will be granted to him, which is "a demand of pure practical reason." Similar to Kant's idea of morality, in the *Gītā*, it can be found that there is an impartial god who sees that the desireless actor is acting without the desire for eternal happiness and that he is bestowed with it at the very end. Here, the goal is not connected to desire. The desire is for the goal or the end, which is the duty. So, desire and the fruits of action are not in causal relation here, but rather entailed from performing the duty for the sake of duty without any desire attached to it. Following Kant, happiness is granted to the virtuous man who performs duty for the sake of duty, and that is the demand of pure practical reason.

Thus, the concept of Niṣkāma karma can be understood if the No- Desire interpretation is granted. A good life is not a life that is lived for the sake of eternal happiness that follows from mokṣa. But when a moral action is performed as a duty, that is, for the sake of duty, then that eternal bliss automatically follows through Mokṣa. In the Gītā, in different verses through various chapters, it has been said that the actor has to be endowed with virtues. A virtuous man will perform his or her svadharma with sincerity, and mokṣa will automatically befall that person. Following Arindam Chakrabarti, "it (a moral action) is causally good for mokṣa. But, both causally and morally, Mokṣa is strictly good for nothing."

Here, ending my take on this with a verse of *Gītā* :

tasmād asaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samāchara
asakto hyācharan karma param āpnoti pūruṣhaḥ.
(B.G. 3.19)

Therefore you perform your duties in a non-attached manner, because by acting without concern for the results, a man attains *ultimate Happiness.*

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